

Battleships: A Relevant Fire Support Platform in the
Twenty-first Century

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Since the close of World War II, the role of American battleships has been steadily reduced. The last battleships to see action, the U.S.S. Wisconsin and the U.S.S. Iowa, were retired in 2001 and 1999 respectively. Their replacements, in the form of cruisers and guided missile destroyers, are purported to possess the improved fire support capabilities and survivability required to support the joint land battle. Nevertheless, eliminating the battleship altogether as a fire support platform for the prosecution of expeditionary operations in the littorals is not a logical conclusion. The retirement of American battleships with cruisers and destroyers adversely affects the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) because its demise deprives land forces of a fire support platform that can achieve and sustain massed surprise fires.

Decline of the American Battleship

Even as the USS Missouri lay at anchor in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945 to serve as the site of the formal surrender of the Empire of Japan, the leadership of the United States Navy had already determined that the role and performance of the aircraft carrier had eclipsed that of its fierce and dreaded battleships. That the carrier with its aircraft, increased striking range, and inherent advantages over battleships in naval surface action would supplant the battleship as the capital ship of the fleet was inevitable. Deemed by the Navy to be impractical for full-time continued

service due to its maintenance and operating costs, manning requirements, and increasingly obsolete technology, the battleship had to go. Over the next several decades, battleships were deactivated and placed in reserve in order to be reactivated during time of war. The problem that the Congress and other observers noted was that the Navy did not have a suitable replacement on station when the last battleship was officially retired in 2001. In 2005, CNN's Robert Novak discussed what many military and civilian observers have noted regarding how the Navy had discarded its battleships in favor of newer high technology ships and systems:

The Navy high command is determined to get rid of the battleships, relying for support on an expensive new destroyer at least 10 years in the future. This is how Washington works. Defense contractors, Pentagon bureaucrats, congressional staffers and career-minded officers make this decision that may ultimately be paid for by Marine and Army infantrymen.¹

After the Second World War, only Iowa-class battleships would again rove the high seas and serve in combat. This was the result of Navy leadership looking toward a future of larger aircraft carriers and advanced technology destroyers and cruisers. Citing a Government Accounting Office (GAO) estimate that it would cost \$1.4 million annually to maintain one battleship, in addition to a \$250 million, 20-month effort to overhaul each battleship, Congress

¹ Novak, Robert. "Losing the Battleships." CNN.com, 6 December 2005 [journal online]; available from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/12/06/novak.marines/index.html>; Internet; accessed 1 December 2007.

decided in late 2005 that it would, at the request of the Navy, officially deactivate the last two battleships.²

Rise of Cruisers and Destroyers

The Navy's requirement to reduce manning requirements, radar signature, and cost of maintenance of ships and on board systems have all served as the impetus to transition to the use of Ticonderoga class cruisers (CG) and the Arleigh Burke and Spruance class guided missile destroyers (DDG). Nowhere in the Navy's justification for the transfer of naval surface fire support from battleships to cruisers and destroyers is an attempt made to convince anyone of increased fire support performance for engaged forces ashore. The use of hull stealth technology to increase survivability from twenty-first century threats appears to be the main reason for change, followed by the multiple capabilities of anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine warfare desired for the platform. The fire support systems of these ships (that are intended to support the joint land battle) seem to be an afterthought in their design.

Yet Navy has progressed with the fire support platform programs on its cruisers and frigates only insofar as necessary to satisfy Congressional critics. As recently as 2006, the GAO

² Brown, Drew. "Navy's Last 2 Battleships Face Retirement; Critics Assail Plan." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 12 December 2005 [journal online]; available from http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051212/news_1n12ships.html; Internet; accessed 1 December 2007.

identified a gap in joint fires to support expeditionary operations caused directly by the inactive status of the two battleships that remain on the Navy registry and the failure of the Navy to field the DDX and extended range munitions.³ In response, the Navy has made a public commitment to Congress to accelerate the fielding of new ships, with improved weapons systems and extended range munitions.⁴

By combining land assault support in a platform that also possesses reliable and effective anti-air, anti-surface, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, the Navy has doused any hope that the proven and capable battleship would survive in future defense authorization and spending bills. Novak also observes:

Marine desire to reactivate the Iowa and Wisconsin runs counter to the DD(X) destroyer of the future. It will not be ready before 2015, costing between \$4.7 billion and \$7 billion. Keeping the battleships in reserve costs only \$250,000 a year, with reactivation estimated at \$500 million (taking six months to a year) and full modernization more than \$1.5 billion (less than two years).⁵

Ramifications for the MAGTF

In the past, Marines in Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, and Kuwait were able to use the battleship as a fire support platform with

³ United States Government Accountability Office. "Issues Related to Navy Battleships." Report 13 December 2005.
URL:<<http://www.gao.gov/docdblite/details.php?rptno=GAO-06-279R>>. Accessed 1 December 2007.

⁴ Brown, Drew.

⁵ Novak, Robert.

telling effect. Salvos from battleships were utilized in striking North Korean and Chinese formations, North Vietnamese anti-aircraft positions, Druze militia positions, and Iraqi forces in the decades following the Second World War.

During a six-month deployment to Vietnam, the USS New Jersey was used for the bombardment of North Vietnamese anti-aircraft batteries. The 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard Chapman, commented that he believed the New Jersey and her big guns likely saved thousands of American lives on the ground and in the air. The Marine Corps calculated that of the 1,067 American aircraft lost to North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire, 80 per cent could have been saved had at least one battleship remained on station in the theater striking enemy positions for the duration of the war.⁶

General P. X. Kelley, the 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps, also lamented the premature and unnecessary demise of the battleship. In June 2005, in response to ongoing public deliberations between the Navy and Congress regarding the Navy's lack of effective fire support, he stated:

I would hate to see a premature demise of the battleships . . . without a suitable replacement on station. In my personal experience in combat, the battleship is the most effective naval fire support platform in the history of naval warfare.⁷

⁶ Novak, Robert.

⁷ Ibid.

Without a fire support platform such as the battleship that can achieve and sustain massed surprise fires, a concern regarding the effectiveness of a system that possesses similar capabilities in range but reduced capabilities in the volume of fire it can deliver has developed. Although the United States remains fully involved with operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, leadership has been looking to future areas of potential conflict, such as the littorals, where an effective naval surface fire support platform will be an essential part of joint fires. These new systems cannot live up to the capabilities and record of performance of the venerable and trusted battleships. A fire support gap between the capabilities of the organic fire support assets of land forces and those of sea-based fire support assets possess may well diminish the effectiveness of the joint land force.

Massed Fires

Battleships are more than a sentimental favorite of Marines and soldiers who are unable to let go of the past. A general comparison of the weapons platforms of the battleship and those of the Navy's replacement fire support platforms reveals the worth of the battleship. Iowa-class battleships, with their 16-inch .50 caliber (16"/50) guns using upgraded 1940s systems, are capable of firing 16-inch projectiles at a rate of two rounds per minute from

each of its nine guns to a range of 42 kilometers.⁸ In comparison, the Advanced Gun System (AGS) possesses two 155 millimeter, or 6.1-inch, guns that are each capable of firing up to twelve rounds per minute to a range of 44 kilometers for its conventional ballistic projectiles.⁹

Where the battleship's weaponry really separates itself from the Navy's fire support of the future is in its employment. With nine guns that can fire simultaneously, battleships can achieve surprising and unparalleled massed fires on a target and sustain that fire. The AGS, with only two guns capable of firing at a higher rate, simply cannot.

Marines can easily translate this equation to its inevitable conclusion: The battleship still possesses more killing power than its naval surface fire support replacement. In addition to effective degrees of responsiveness and accuracy, anyone who has faced an enemy has most likely desired a fire support system that delivers massed fires and the effect of a full sheaf or broadside as opposed to a system capable of delivering only one or two rounds at a time.

⁸ Muir, Malcolm. *The Iowa Class Battleships: Iowa*, New Jersey, Missouri, Wisconsin. Poole, England: Blandford Press, 1987.

⁹ GlobalSecurity.org. "DDG-1000 Zumwalt / DD(X) Multi-Mission Surface Combatant Future Surface Combatant." [URL:<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/dd-x.html>](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/dd-x.html). Accessed 1 December 2007.

Options

The prime method today's Navy utilizes in extending the range of its current and future fire support platforms is extended range guided munitions, not weapon system capability. This represents a development of technology and investiture of financial resources that could have been easily applied to the existing sixteen-inch projectile fired by the 16"/50 guns mounted on Iowa-class battleships. That the Navy has already progressed so far in developing and fielding the CGX and DDX does not render the resurrection of the battleship as a fire support platform as impossible or impractical. Those new ships that have already been developed to a certain point can still be fielded. Those further back in the pipeline could still be either completed or shut off. The Navy has already proposed a reduction of the total number of DDXs to be fielded from the original 24 to 8 to 12.¹⁰ Some of these financial resources can then be dedicated to reactivating, modernizing, and maintaining one, two, or several battleships. These different classes of ships could serve alongside one another in providing accurate and responsive fire support to forces ashore.

Conclusion

In the Navy's haste to pursue a high technology future, it has surrendered a cornerstone of its combat power. Viewed by Navy leadership as an expensive fire support platform that drained

¹⁰ Brown, Drew.

resources from other more desirable programs, battleships have been phased out. Similar to the words spoken by General Vandergrift when defending the existence of the Marines, Navy leadership must certainly say to itself, "If the battleship has not made a case for itself as a deadly, effective, and essential fire support platform in over one hundred years, then it must go." Most would argue that the American battleship has consistently made just such a case and is capable of continuing to do so well into the twenty-first century.

1766 words

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